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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003542

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI EXPLAINS HIS GOAL OF A UNITY
GOVERNMENT -- AND SAYS UN TRIBUNAL WILL BE APPROVED

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Amal Movement Leader and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri argued November 3 that his recently-announced initiative for "consultations" among Lebanon's political blocs was not a Syrian-Hizballah plot but rather a genuine attempt to defuse a dangerous situation created by a "pressured" Hassan Nasrallah and an overly-ambitious Michel Aoun. Berri said that without his proposed 15-day period of consultations, the intemperate actions of Nasrallah and Aoun and the predictable counter-actions by the March 14 coalition could bring a cascade of sectarian tension and eventual violence. Berri contended that he does not want a collapse of the current cabinet and he does not want a change in the Prime Ministership. What was necessary, he argued, was an "opening" of the Siniora government, specifically an increase in the Council of Ministers to 30 members, to include representatives of Michel Aoun (but not from other pro-Syrian factions). He even broached the idea of dealing with the Lahoud presidency, as part of a grand compromise. Concerning the UN Tribunal to try the Hariri and possibly other suspects, Berri unexpectedly stated that in its present form, he was confident the draft agreement between the UN and Lebanon would be approved in both the Council of Ministers and Parliament. End summary.

¶2. (C) A noticeably upbeat Nabih Berri met with the Ambassador and emboff at Berri's offices in Ain El Tineh on November 3. The Speaker's political advisor, Ali Hamdan, also attended the meeting. It was the first face-to-face meeting between Speaker Berri and any senior U.S. official since September 25. On numerous occasions over the past months, Berri, rebuffing requests for meetings with USG and Congressional officials, had expressed his displeasure with U.S. support for Israel, and in fact, started the meeting with an accusation that we were "coddling" the GOI by not coming out forcefully against IDF overflights of Lebanese territory. Berri also brought up an old issue, the CBS "60 Minutes" news story that implied he was on a terrorist watch list, but was not exactly clear about what more he wanted from the U.S. beyond the already-issued statement that the story had its facts wrong concerning Berri. Once these matters were addressed, the meeting settled down to a remarkably clear discussion of Berri's near-term goals and views on the current political situation.

¶3. (C) When assured that U.S. support for Lebanon was firm,

Speaker Berri somewhat undiplomatically asked what option did the U.S. have? The Speaker explained that in his political analysis, the U.S. could ill-afford to jeopardize (in his eyes) the one true democracy in the Middle East, when U.S. interests were under severe strain elsewhere in the region. Berri acknowledged that Lebanon needs Western support to recover and prosper, but he also warned (as he has been recently quoted in the press) that "too much U.S. love," or at least in its public displays, could be dangerous.

HIZBALLAH'S ALLY...WITH CAVEATS

¶4. (C) Rejecting the suggestion that his topics revealed a pro-Syria and Hizballah bias, Berri explained his reason for initiating national "consultations" as an almost noble act of patriotism. (Note: Berri prefers calling his initiative by this term, because they will deal with a limited agenda, rather than his earlier "National Dialogue," which he considered an open forum at which almost any issue could be discussed. End note.) Berri stated that he saw a coming clash between the pro-reform March 14 coalition and the Nasrallah/Aoun-led March 8 movement. The Speaker said that for several weeks, both Nasrallah and Aoun had raised tensions by issuing several subtle, and not so subtle, threats of street demonstrations if their calls for a "unity government" went unheeded. Berri also heaped criticism on the March 14 coalition politicians for refusing to engage on this issue and, in their turn, using increasingly provocative language against their political adversaries.

¶5. (C) Berri argued that even when he raised the idea of consultations, the March 14 coalition had attacked him, even though he had purposely included the issues of Paris III and the draft Electoral Law to balance the agenda against the

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Hizballah-Aoun issue of a "unity government." In Berri's account, the final straw came in Nasrallah's interview early this week, in which Hizballah's leader threatened street action if the Siniora Government failed to meet his terms by November 13.

¶6. (C) To lower tensions and create a peaceful alternative, Berri said he met with Minister of Telecommunications (and ally of Walid Jumblatt) Marwan Hamadeh, along with five other members of the March 14 alliance. Berri said he challenged them to explain their accusations that his initiative was a threat against the government, while he argued that "consultations" were actually the only way out of an increasingly volatile dilemma. The March 14 idea that discussing a new election law would lead to early elections ("which I don't support") was ridiculous, in his view: Berri (being Berri) used as an unassailable argument (to him) a question to Hamadeh about why he, Berri, would ever plot to do himself out of his job as Speaker, which could theoretically happen if a new parliament were voted in.

¶7. (C) Interestingly, Berri was much more critical of Nasrallah's heavy-handed tactics than he has almost ever been. As noted above, he was sharply critical of Nasrallah's intimidating language. When asked what his far more powerful Shia ally would think of the initiative, Berri responded, "I am allied with Hizballah, but I only take orders from God." In Berri's opinion, the soon-to-commence consultations would help preserve the Siniora government and defuse the building crisis.

"I WANT SINIORA TO STAY"

¶8. (C) Speaker Berri made clear that he has two primary objectives: he does not want a collapse of the present government, and he wants Fouad Siniora to remain as Prime Minister. Even though he declared, "Naturally I'm against the government because of their inaction in the South," Berri

also argued that replacing the entire Cabinet would be destabilizing and undesirable. Rather, he hoped that the proposed discussions would produce an expanded Cabinet with six new members, five of whom would represent the interests of either the March 8 bloc or Michel Aoun. With five Shia ministers already in the cabinet and one Greek Orthodox (Yacoub Sarraf) reliably pro-Lahoud, that would give the pro-Syrians a total of 11 ministers out of 30 (vice the six out of 24 in the current cabinet).

¶9. (C) Berri acknowledged that the March 8 alliance would therefore gain the one-third "blocking vote" that the Siniora government has long resisted, but he maintained that would not result in the political disaster that March 14 has always feared. To buttress his contention, Berri argued that only once in the 18 months of the Siniora government has the Shia bloc voted against the March 14 majority. Thus, the idea that the March 14 majority would face vetoes by the minority was a false argument. (Berri neglected to acknowledge that the threat of a Shia cabinet walk-out or threat of a "confessional veto" has consistently influenced decisions in the Cabinet, including what is tabled before the cabinet.)

A FLUID TIMELINE

¶10. (C) With a wave of his hand, Speaker Berri dismissed Nasrallah's ultimatum of a week deadline, suggesting that ways would be found to extend the consultations as needed. He said that he was looking for acceptance of the "concept" of a national unity government, hoping that the warring parties can simply agree to share power in a "more equitable" manner in these discussions. If so, the actual process of nominating and selecting the new members could take months. In this manner, Berri implied that the Siniora government would have a greater window of opportunity to enact its long-desired reform measures, without the constant barrage of criticism to which it was now subjected. Berri confided, "It is much more dangerous to have Aoun outside the government, than inside it." When asked why Nasrallah was being so generous to Aoun, Berri said that Nasrallah had confided to him that following Aoun's unalloyed support of Hizballah during the war, when even some Shia had criticized him, he owed the Free Patriotic Movement leader "consideration." In Nasrallah's view, no one supported Hizballah as faithfully inside Lebanon as Aoun.

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PRESIDENCY PART OF A COMPROMISE?

¶11. (C) When asked if the long-simmering presidential issue could be part of the discussions -- as a change in the presidency leads ipso facto, constitutionally, to the resignation of the cabinet -- Berri was intrigued and indicated that anything was possible. He wondered aloud that if the March 14 alliance "were ready," perhaps some sort of "grand compromise" was achievable. But what was most critical at this juncture, he maintained, was to get the various blocs to sit down and openly discuss each others' concerns and objectives. "We'll know in two days if this is going to work," and with a Berri shrug, said that if it does not, street demonstrations and instability were inevitable. The Ambassador pressed Berri privately at the end of the meeting about moving forward on removing Lahoud. Berri indicated that he would love to do so but did not know how. Moreover, he said, if there was a new president, particularly one allied with March 14, he would have to insist on the pro-Syrians having 13 or 14 ministers in the 30-seat cabinet.

HARIRI TRIBUNAL

¶12. (C) More unexpected was the Speaker's conviction that

the necessary approval of the UN-Lebanon Agreement on the Special Tribunal is fairly assured, now that the clause dealing with "crimes against humanity" had been withdrawn from the draft document. He saw the deletion of that clause as preserving immunity for high officials. Berri unambiguously expressed his support for the Tribunal and stated that he saw no reason why it would not cleanly pass through the Council of Ministers and Parliament.

¶13. (C) Following the meeting, the Ambassador made a statement to the press which called for peaceful negotiations to resolve political disputes and condemned any efforts to use street demonstrations to force changes. Upon hearing the statement, Berri's senior advisor Ali Hamdan described it as an "excellent" message.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) No one can doubt Berri's cleverness, often playing multiple games simultaneously. (With his ability to anticipate all possible moves way ahead of others, he'd be one mean chess player.) The basic outline of the upcoming consultations was probably Syrian (or Hizballah) inspired, given the limited topics under discussion. After all, an open-ended debate would have inevitably led back to the awkward question of Hizballah's arms and could have postponed any government expansion indefinitely. But Berri seemed sincere in downplaying the one-week deadline imposed by Hizballah and Aoun, and his suggestion that, once the concept for a national unity cabinet was accepted, actually implementing such a change could take months, during which time the existing majority could approve the Hariri tribunal and take other steps. In any case, Berri's consultative process has at least bought some time.

FELTMAN